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## Introduction

Truth is found neither in the thesis nor the antithesis, but in an emergent synthesis which reconciles the two.

—GEORG WILHELM FRIEDRICH HEGEL, GERMAN PHILOSOPHER<sup>1</sup>

The reason why it is so difficult for existing firms to capitalize on disruptive innovations is that their processes and their business model that make them good at the existing business actually make them bad at competing for the disruption.

—CLAYTON CHRISTENSEN, AMERICAN ACADEMIC  
AND BUSINESS CONSULTANT<sup>2</sup>

The familiar patterns of European politics are undergoing radical change. Stable party systems, dominated by mainstream parties of the center left and center right, are fracturing. In recent years, we have witnessed the steady electoral decline of mainstream parties and the rise of political outsiders. The 2017 presidential elections in France are a case in point. Neither the candidate of the center-left Socialist Party nor the candidate of the center-right Conservative Party made it to the final runoff. Instead, the election became a contest between two challengers: Emmanuel Macron and his newly formed La République En Marche! (The republic on the move!)

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party and Marine Le Pen of the radical right-wing National Rally (previously National Front). France is not the only country where traditional parties have been losing ground recently. In Italy, the ruling center-left Democratic Party was beaten to the top spot in 2018 by the radical right-wing League, led by the charismatic Matteo Salvini, and the new populist party, the Five Star Movement, founded by the Italian comedian Beppe Grillo. In the Netherlands, electoral support for the traditionally strong Labour Party shrunk to single digits in the 2017 parliamentary elections. Even in Sweden, where the Social Democratic Party has dominated politics since the introduction of universal suffrage, the party received its lowest share of the vote for almost 100 years in the 2018 elections, while the far-right Swedish Democrats strongly gained in popularity.

The decline of mainstream parties has been accompanied by the rise of political outsiders, on both the right and left sides of the political spectrum. These political entrepreneurs gained electoral traction through their attacks on the political establishment and their mobilization of new issues. In the 2019 European parliamentary elections, three national populist parties—the newly formed Brexit Party in the UK, the League in Italy, and the National Rally in France—topped the polls. On the left of the political spectrum, green parties also did well. In Germany, the Greens outperformed the traditional center-left Social Democrats with a whopping 20 percent of the vote. Green challengers also performed well in several other West European countries.

What explains these upheavals in European politics? Political commentators and scholars provide a series of different interpretations. Much of the commentary has focused on the rise of right-wing populism,<sup>3</sup> and many have pointed to structural changes to the economy, increasing globalization, and economic downturns as the root cause of this upsurge.<sup>4</sup> Such explanations have drawn attention to the anger of the “left-behind” communities,<sup>5</sup> as well as the “cultural backlash” against multiculturalism and immigration.<sup>6</sup> While these factors no doubt are important, they do not provide a complete picture of what exactly has changed in Western European politics

over the last few decades and why. The focus on right-wing populism fails to acknowledge that not all challenges to the existing political order have come from the right; some have also come from the left, like Syriza in Greece, and the center, such as La République En Marche! in France. Moreover, the emphasis on structural changes to the economy is difficult to square with the fact that challenges to the existing political order are not a new phenomenon, and nor is the trajectory of challenger parties uniform across countries. It also does not explain why challenger parties successfully entered the political arena in some countries as early as the 1970s and 1980s, while they are still marginal in others to this day. Importantly, the recent focus on the rise of populist parties tends to ignore the relative stability of mainstream parties. Other recent studies have focused explicitly on mainstream parties and their decline.<sup>7</sup> As with the work on the rise of the populist right, this literature takes as a starting point structural changes to voter demand that have led to changing electoral fortunes of traditionally mainstream parties. But existing scholarship rarely seeks to explain both continuity *and* change in West European party competition. By focusing on the recent electoral losses of mainstream political parties and the successes of challenger parties, it is easy to overlook the fact that the story of postwar Western European politics is predominately one of the resilience of the traditional party families. Moreover, while it is tempting to focus on the uniformity of the disruption to the system, “the rise of populism,” “the decline of social democracy,” and so on, there is in fact considerable variation in the timing of challenger-party success across countries. This implies that common shocks or structural changes can only partially account for what we are observing.

This book argues that in order to understand change in European politics, we need to account for the drivers of both the political upheavals we have observed recently and the decades of relative stability and dominance of the traditional mainstream parties. Rather than simply asking why political outsiders have been so successful recently, we also need to query why mainstream parties have been able to maintain their grip on power for so long. These questions are

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intrinsically interlinked. Moreover, we need to be able to account for the differences in timing and degree of electoral success of political outsiders. In order to do this, we have developed a theory of political change.

Political change, we argue, evolves around two competing political forces, those of *dominance* and *innovation*. These are the forces that also shape economic change and shape the fate of companies. By drawing on an analogy of how firms compete for market share, we argue that party politics is the struggle between mainstream parties trying to keep hold of their market power and political entrepreneurs aiming to chip away at mainstream dominance. While structural changes to societies provide an important backdrop to our argument, our approach focuses on the strategies that parties employ to succeed in the political market. Political change is the result of a tug-of-war between mainstream parties seeking to protect their dominance and political entrepreneurs with innovating strategies to break this dominance.

The decades-long ascendancy of the traditional mainstream parties has been possible because the political marketplace is not a free, fully competitive market, but rather one that favors dominant parties. Dominant parties are those parties that have government experience, while challenger parties are those who have not held office. It is difficult to break through as a challenger when many voters are attached to the dominant parties, whose office experience lends them additional credibility. As a result, many challenger parties fail to make any real impact on politics. Yet, some succeed and dramatically change the political landscape. The question is *why*. This book suggests that as the bonds between dominant parties and their voters have loosened in recent decades, it has become more difficult for those parties to protect their market power and easier for challenger parties to challenge and disrupt the existing political order through innovation. It also suggests that the challenger parties that succeed have done so by combining a specific set of policy and rhetorical innovation strategies. In time, as these political challengers become more electorally successful, they may become the new dominant forces in politics.

## The Argument in Brief

To explain why Western European party systems have remained so stable for most of the postwar period despite major economic and cultural change, but are now facing disruptions by challenger parties, we introduce a theory of political change. It borrows key insights from the literature on *industrial organization* in the field of economics. Industrial organization studies markets that are characterized by imperfect competition. That is to say, markets in which a limited number of firms compete.<sup>8</sup> Our theory of political change allows us to explain both the resilience of dominant parties and the pathway to success of challenger parties. Our argument has four core elements:

**The political market is an oligopoly:** The market for votes and political office is an example of imperfect competition, because the rules of the game favor dominant parties and voters are attached to dominant parties. This makes it difficult for challenger parties to become dominant.

Dominant parties actively attempt to safeguard their market power by adopting positions that appeal to a wide electoral base and focus their campaigning on issues where they are competitive.

**There is weakening of this oligopoly:** We are witnessing a weakening of the conditions that advantage the dominant parties. Voters are becoming more like critical consumers and less loyal to established parties, which makes it more difficult for dominant parties to safeguard their market power. The center-seeking catchall strategies of dominant parties are more likely to backfire as voters feel that parties look too similar and perceive that there is not a real political choice. Also, it has become more difficult for dominant parties to control the political agenda as wedge issues that do not fit nicely into the traditional left–right dimension in politics have emerged.

**Challenger parties act as political entrepreneurs:** The market power of dominant parties is constantly under attack from

challenger parties that act as political entrepreneurs. Successful political entrepreneurs employ a twofold innovation strategy: (1) they introduce issues that can drive a wedge between coalitions of and within dominant parties, and (2) they use antiestablishment rhetoric to weaken the competence advantage of established parties. As voters become less loyal to dominant parties, these strategies are more likely to be electorally successful.

**The party system is fragmenting:** The weakening of the oligopoly and the success of challenger parties leads to market fragmentation. Market fragmentation increases the choice available to citizens, but also makes electoral outcomes more unpredictable and complicates government formation and stability.

Let us illustrate the rise of challenger parties in the political marketplace through an example from the world of business: the rise and fall of Nokia. In 1987, Nokia introduced the world's first handheld cell phone, the Mobira Cityman 900. This iconic phone was nicknamed "the Gorba" after the then president of the Soviet Union Mikhail Gorbachev was seen using it the same year. However, it took a few more years before Nokia's cell phones gained mass appeal. In the 1990s, the company started focusing solely on the telecommunications market, and developed smaller and cheaper cell phones accessible to a mass market. Their 2100 series phones became best sellers, with around 20 million handsets sold worldwide.<sup>9</sup> This was the beginning of Nokia's dominance of the cell-phone market.<sup>10</sup> Nokia had become the market leader with mass appeal and a distinct brand. Most people who lived through the 1990s will remember the iconic Nokia Tune ringtone and the classic Snake game. When Nokia launched the Nokia 3210, with an internal antenna, in 1999, it sold 160 million units worldwide, making it one of the most popular phones in history. Nokia continued as the world leader in the cell-phone market into the early 2000s, but was not able to take advantage of the innovation in wireless and internet technologies to the same extent as some of its competitors. Most notably, Apple launched the

first-generation iPhone in 2007, and the touch-screen phone grew in popularity. While Nokia introduced its own all-touch smartphone in 2008, the company was no longer the prime mover in the field. Apple was able to successfully present the introduction of the iPhone as a “revolution” in cell-phone technology. The iPhone was more than simply a phone: as the App Store was launched in 2008, the iPhone was enhanced as a minicomputer with personalized capabilities that could transform it into a music player, a television screen, a piano keyboard, a torch, or a compass. With this new revolution in the smartphone world, Nokia became yesterday’s news. The company’s cell-phone market share fell rapidly: from 49 percent in 2007 to 34 percent three years later. In 2011, Apple overtook Nokia in smartphone sales, and by 2013 Nokia’s market share had slipped to just 3 percent.<sup>11</sup> Apple and Samsung had become the new market leaders, with their own distinctive brands and loyal consumers.

The story of the rise and fall of Nokia illustrates what the Austrian economist Joseph Schumpeter has referred to as “creative destruction.”<sup>12</sup> This is the idea that innovation creates new companies while simultaneously destroying old ones that fail to adjust after their initial innovation has run its course. Schumpeter identifies innovation as critical for economic change. According to this view, economic change is fundamentally shaped by two forces: innovation revolving around entrepreneurs, who are doing new things or doing things that are already being done but in a new way, and dominance, which is the market power that dominant market players aim to protect.<sup>13</sup> We argue that these same forces also shape change in the markets for votes, seats, and political office in Europe. Political change is as much a story of the ability of challenger parties to innovate as it is of the inability of dominant parties to respond.

### **Dominant and Challenger Parties**

Political entrepreneurship has a long-standing tradition in Europe. Think of the rise of social democratic parties in the late nineteenth century, leaders of political student movements in the 1960s, and green parties in the 1980s, for example. What might be different

today is the relative weakness of dominant parties in protecting their core market power and the resulting fragmentation of the party system. To understand the success of challenger parties today, we need to study the inability of dominant parties to adapt to a changing political environment in which critical voters are much less loyal to the major parties, as well as the capacity of challenger parties to adapt to this environment. We also need an account that can explain why challenger parties were able to disrupt mainstream dominance decades ago in some countries, while the mainstream parties have retained their dominance in others.

To illustrate this interplay between dominant and challenger parties, we borrow insights from how firms compete. Analogous to the classic economic model of party competition, we assume that parties, similarly to firms, compete for their voters by offering policies that appeal to the average voter. In the classic spatial economic model of the American economist Harold Hotelling, ice-cream vendors try to attract customers on a hot summer's day: people who want to buy ice cream from the nearest ice-cream stand.<sup>14</sup> Since the product, ice cream, and the associated prices are likely relatively uniform, it makes sense for beachgoers to save time and energy by walking only to the nearest seller. From the vendors' point of view, it is sensible to locate centrally on the beach so they can attract more customers. If there are just two ice cream stalls, and the beachgoers are spread relatively evenly along the beach, then each of the ice-cream sellers will sell ice cream to half of the consumers. This principle of minimum differentiation in economic theory inspired the spatial models of party competition of the American economist Anthony Downs.<sup>15</sup> Instead of a beach, we have a unidimensional political space, where the ice-cream vendors are political parties and the location is their political position. The assumption is that each voter will vote for the candidate or party that is closest to his or her political position. So, when a candidate takes a position to the right of the other candidate, he or she will get the votes of everyone to the right of that position. As with the ice-cream vendors on the beach, political parties will choose a political position that is virtually the same as their oppo-

nents'. Furthermore, the parties will be driven to select the political position of the median voter.

While this model can explain the strategies adopted by many mainstream parties in Europe, converging on the political center and adopting similar “catchall” policies to appeal to a large segment of the electorate, it cannot explain the development we have witnessed in recent years with parties seemingly on the political extremes gaining significant electoral ground. We argue that to explain the patterns of party competition in postwar Western Europe, as well as recent disruptions, we need to go beyond the model of perfect competition where all ice-cream vendors, or parties, are on an equal footing.<sup>16</sup> There are barriers to entry that protect the dominant parties in the arena. But disruption can happen. And when it does, it is not driven by parties adopting the most centrist position on the left–right dimension, but rather by political entrepreneurs introducing new or previously ignored political issues that disrupt the political equilibrium and give the issue entrepreneur a strategic advantage. We also assume that voters, just like ice-cream consumers, care about not only the location of the party, but also the competence and integrity of the seller. As long as mainstream parties are seen as the most trustworthy and competent, it is difficult for challengers to make significant inroads. However, if that trust in the competence of the dominant parties erodes, challengers can exploit that with a powerful antiestablishment message.

We argue that understanding party politics in Western Europe requires us to explore the interplay between the two competing forces that maintain it: *dominance* and *innovation*. Dominance concerns the power of the dominant parties in the system to protect their positions. Innovation concerns the process through which political parties introduce a new or previously ignored issue, and where they use rhetorical innovation to challenge the competence of dominant parties. If the political entrepreneurship of challenger parties is successful, this may lead to a transformation of the political system. The most obvious change that successful challenger parties can bring about is to the composition of the party system as they capture a

greater share of the electorate. But there are more subtle underlying changes that occur alongside such changes to the party system; namely, that voters begin to prioritize different issues in line with the issue entrepreneurship and antiestablishment strategies employed by challenger parties. Challenger parties bring about greater choice and may increase feelings of representation. Yet, the rise of challenger parties might also have disruptive effects. A more fragmented and polarized party system and the presence of challengers make it more difficult to form coalitions and also tend to make government arrangements less stable.

### **Plan of the Book**

We develop and empirically test our argument in the remainder of the book. Our empirical focus is on Western Europe, as this region is traditionally home to some of the most stable and established party systems but has recently witnessed considerable changes. Yet, the timing and extent of this change is not uniform across countries in Western Europe. Our theory of political change, based on the strategies that dominant and challenger parties employ, allows us to account for these differences. In chapter 1, we explain our distinction between challenger and dominant parties in greater detail and look empirically at the changes to West European party systems since the introduction of universal suffrage. We then discuss our definition of challenger parties and look more closely at what unites these parties. In chapter 2, we outline our theory of political change. As discussed above, the main tenet of our argument is that the dynamics of party competition in Europe can best be understood as a tug-of-war between dominant and challenger parties, with dominant parties aiming to protect their pivotal positions in the system, while challenger parties aim to chip away at this dominance through innovation. After presenting our theory, we delve deeper into the interplay of our three main conceptual building blocks: *dominance*, *innovation*, and *transformation*.

In chapters 3 to 8, we outline a set of precise mechanisms that allow us to understand the dynamics underlying mainstream-party

dominance, the innovation efforts of challengers and the conditions under which party systems will be transformed. We do so by providing a wealth of empirical data, which compares over 200 parties in 19 countries in Western Europe. This allows for a thorough understanding of the continuity and change in party systems in Europe. We also draw on specific country examples to give an in-depth picture of the causes and consequences of change. Chapter 3 examines party loyalty as a barrier to entry, showing how the ties between voters and mainstream parties have declined in most Western European countries, as voters have become less attached to political parties. In chapter 4, we explore the strategies that mainstream parties employ to remain dominant, through distinctive convergence, issue avoidance, and competence mobilization. We examine these strategies empirically by analyzing manifesto and survey data. We then move on to the innovation of challenger parties. Chapter 5 focuses on the policy innovation of challenger parties, which we call “issue entrepreneurship.” It refers to the mobilization of new or previously ignored issues that cut across dominant ideological dimensions and are a core aspect of challenger parties’ electoral appeal and political influence. The strategy is to appeal to voters and potentially cause a rift within dominant parties. We examine issue entrepreneurship empirically by analyzing manifesto data. Chapter 6 explores the antiestablishment rhetoric of challenger parties, which also sets them apart from the mainstream. Using state-of-the-art computerized content analysis and a wealth of data, including party manifestos and expert data from across Western Europe, this chapter examines the evolution of challenger-party strategies.

The final chapters of the book explore the transformation of party competition and electoral politics in Europe. In chapter 7, we examine changes to electoral behavior. Analyzing rich individual-level surveys and party-level data, we investigate what types of voters challenger parties appeal to, and how these voters respond to the innovative messages of challenger parties. Chapter 8 examines how the rise of challenger parties has led to increased fragmentation and polarization of choice, again using individual-level surveys and party-level data. The rise of challengers has resulted in a tension between

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the positive effects of greater choice for citizens, which mobilizes them and enhances their sense of representation, and the negative consequences for government efficiency and stability. Most challenger parties never enter government, but they can nonetheless have a profound impact on the ability of governments to form coalitions and to implement legislation, and on their survival chances. The concluding chapter of the book, chapter 9, summarizes the key arguments and findings of the book. It also discusses the normative and policy implications of this study, focusing particularly on the issue of the changing nature of representation and democracy in Europe.

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